

PLATTE / KANSAS RIVERS ECOSYSTEM PLAN



U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
AND PARTNERS

AUGUST 2002

**U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
PLATTE / KANSAS RIVERS
ECOSYSTEM PLAN**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PURPOSE AND MISSION STATEMENT	3
PLATTE / KANSAS RIVERS ECOSYSTEM VISION	4
PLATTE / KANSAS RIVERS ECOSYSTEM DESCRIPTION	4
GEOGRAPHIC SUB UNITS	
MIXED GRASS PRAIRIE	6
RESOURCE AREA	6
VISION	6
ENDANGERED SPECIES	6
INVASIVE SPECIES	6
ECOLOGICAL TARGETS	7
GOALS AND OBJECTIVES	7
STRATEGIES	8
PARTNERS	8
MOUNTAIN	
RESOURCE AREA	10
VISION	10
ENDANGERED SPECIES	10
INVASIVE SPECIES	11
ECOLOGICAL TARGETS	11
GOALS AND OBJECTIVES	11
STRATEGIES	12
PARTNERS	12
SHORT GRASS	
RESOURCE AREA	14
VISION	14
ENDANGERED SPECIES	14
INVASIVE SPECIES	15
ECOLOGICAL TARGETS	15
GOALS AND OBJECTIVES	15
STRATEGIES	16
PARTNERS	16

LITERATURE CITED	16
APPENDIX 1. ECOSYSTEM DECISION MATRIX	17
APPENDIX 2. ECOSYSTEM TEAM MEMBER ADDRESSES	20
APPENDIX 3. TEAM MEMBERS OF GEOGRAPHIC SUB UNITS	22

Ecosystem Planning for the Platte / Kansas Rivers Ecosystem
Including the States of Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska and Wyoming

PURPOSE AND MISSION STATEMENT

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 93-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System comprised of more than 500 national wildlife refuges and thousands of waterfowl production areas. It also operates 65 national fish hatcheries and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands and grasslands, administers the Endangered Species Act, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars, collected in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment, to state wildlife agencies.

Ecosystem teams are fundamental to the Service in sustaining good land health. Ecosystem teams should be the primary delivery mechanism for establishing priorities and identifying areas of greatest conservation concern in their ecosystems (Fulfilling the promise, 1999). The Service is developing a nationally coordinated approach involving ecosystem teams, partners and stakeholders to preserve natural resources for the American people.

The purpose of the Platte / Kansas Rivers ecosystem plan is to identify key resource components within the ecosystem, identify threats to those components, initiate plans and actions to minimize those threats, and promote landscape level conservation efforts with partners. This document outlines a strategic plan of action for the Platte / Kansas Rivers ecosystem in accordance with Service ecosystem policy. The plan establishes three primary sub-units within the Platte / Kansas Rivers ecosystem, Mixed Grass Prairie, Mountain, and Short Grass Prairie geographic units. Each geographic unit is defined, specific threats are identified, goals and objectives are outlined, strategies developed to conserve biodiversity. This plan also contains a decision matrix the Platte / Kansas Rivers ecoteam will use to prioritize projects when multiple opportunities to address natural resource issues arise within the ecosystem (see Appendix 1).

The Platte / Kansas Rivers ecosystem team recognizes the “artificial nature” of ecosystem boundaries. The Platte / Kansas Rivers ecosystem share common landscape types with Arkansas / Red River, Main Stem Missouri, Missouri / Yellowstone / Columbia, Upper Colorado River and Rio Grande ecosystems. While this plan addresses priorities within the Platte / Kansas Rivers boundary, we remain committed to working with, and supporting, adjoining ecosystem team goals and objectives. We anticipate sharing expertise, information and resources across ecosystem, state and regional boundaries. Additionally, this plan is expected to pave the way for larger more detailed plans in the future. As partnerships are developed, successes realized, and our knowledge of ecological processes evolve, this document should be modified and improved to reestablish new challenges. We anticipate revisiting this Plan at five year intervals.

PLATTE / KANSAS RIVERS ECOSYSTEM VISION

The vision of the Platte / Kansas Rivers ecoteam is to provide partnership based, landscape level conservation for the diversity and abundance of natural resources within the ecosystem. The team envisions landscapes which exhibit natural, healthy, ecological processes; ongoing protection of threatened, endangered and endemic species; protecting and promoting native prairie vegetation; involving all stakeholders in decision making processes; and recognizes that partnerships are the key to success.

PLATTE / KANSAS RIVERS ECOSYSTEM DESCRIPTION

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has divided the country into 53 watershed-based ecosystem management units (see Map 1). The Platte / Kansas Rivers ecosystem unit encompasses approximately 182,000 square miles of the central Great Plains of the United States (see Map 2). The Platte / Kansas Rivers ecoregion includes the States of Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska and Wyoming. The area is diverse, beginning at the headwaters of the North and South Platte River systems high in the Rocky Mountains, moving into sage brush uplands of north-central Colorado and southeastern Wyoming, traversing across the shortgrass prairie regions of eastern Colorado, and the mixed grass prairie regions of Nebraska and Kansas. The primary ecological processes affecting this system are climate, cultivation, grazing and fire. The ecosystem is considered arid with an average annual precipitation between 8 and 16 inches per year. Approximately 85% of the Platte / Kansas Rivers ecoregion is privately owned. The remainder is primarily owned and managed by state and federal agencies.

Grasslands are considered to be one of the most imperiled ecosystem types in North America and worldwide (TNC, 1998). The Platte / Kansas Rivers ecosystem falls primarily into the Northern Great Plains Dry Steppe Province, and the Central Shortgrass Prairie ecoregions as described by Bailey et al. (1994). Bison and other native herbivores have been extirpated or greatly reduced throughout the Ecoregion. Grassland birds, such as the mountain plover and lesser prairie chicken, have shown steeper and more widespread declines than any other group of North American species (TNC 1998).

In the larger context of conserving biological diversity in agricultural and natural ecosystems in North America, prairies are a priority, perhaps the highest priority. It is time to bring a measure of prairie conservation to the forefront.

Fred B. Samson and Fritz L. Knopf, bioscience (1994)

People and partnerships are the keys to success. The team will continue to develop partnerships to conserve the diversity and abundance of natural resources in the ecosystem. In some cases, educating people to the importance of conservation issues, so they may become advocates for the resources, may be the most valuable effort.

The Platte / Kansas Rivers Ecosystem Planning Team (see Appendix 2 and 3), with input from current partners and field stations, identified and prioritized three primary geographic sub-units, Mixed Grass Prairie, Mountain, and Shortgrass Prairie sub-units. Within each geographic sub-

unit, priorities were established based on significance in the ecosystem, species diversity, risk/threat to the entire ecosystem area, public benefits, trust resources. Also considered was legal mandates, opportunity for partnerships, likelihood of success, and cost effectiveness.

Geographic Sub-Unit: MIXED GRASS PRAIRIE

Mixed Grass Prairie - Resource Area:

The mixed grass prairie encompasses the eastern 2/3 of the north ½ of the State of Kansas and the eastern 2/3 of the State of Nebraska (see Map 3). Elevation varies from 3000 to 5500 feet above mean sea level. The area is largely under private ownership and consists primarily of grassland or grassland converted to crop land. Marais des Cygnes National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) is considered a priority for this geographic sub-unit, although it does not officially fall within the Platte / Kansas Rivers ecoregional boundaries.

Mixed Grass Prairie - Vision:

The mixed grass ecosystem will be one in which: 1) natural, healthy ecological processes dominate; 2) threatened, endangered and endemic species are protected; 3) recreational opportunities are enjoyed in a way compatible with resource protection; 4) economic development complement environmental protection; 5) decisions are based on the best available scientific data; 6) all stakeholders are involved in a collaborative decision-making process; 7) actions are guided by adaptive, flexible management and monitoring; 8) partnerships are the norm; 9) a largely privately owned landscape where family farms and ranches are economically viable and resource stewardship is tied sustainable agriculture.

Mixed Grass Prairie - Threatened and Endangered Species:

Least tern
Piping plover
Topeka shiner
Meads milkweed
Western prairie fringed orchid
Pallid sturgeon
Bald eagle
American burying beetle
Tiger beetle (Salt Creek) - candidate
Eskimo curlew
Whooping crane
Blowout penstemon
Black-footed ferret

Mixed Grass Prairie - Invasive Species of Concern:

Purple loosestrife
Sericea lespediza
Zebra mussel
Osage orange
Canada thistle
Musk thistle
Leafy spurge
Russian olive
Eastern red cedar

Salt cedar
Phragmites
Siberian elm
Black locust
Honey locust

Mixed Grass Prairie - Ecological Targets:

1. Continuing Priorities

Platte River
Rainwater Basin
Sandhills
Missouri River

2. New Initiatives

Saline wetlands
Tallgrass region
Marais des Cygnes River
Kansas River

Mixed Grass - Goals and Objectives:

1. Expand the existing grassland easement program, utilized by the Service in the Dakotas, to protect high-quality native prairie from urban development and agricultural conversions. Prioritize conservation easements that connect native prairie tracts. Use current GAP analysis information to prioritize project areas.

2. Encourage restoration and enhancement of both prairie uplands and wetlands on public and private lands to promote and preserve diversity of prairie habitats and species. Examine the possibility of lengthening the Conservation Reserve Program contract time frame and paying more for native grass mixes that include a wide variety of native species.

3. Develop a system of demonstration areas for prairie management. Develop programs and brochures on native prairie functions and values.

4. Reduce invasion of exotic species that out compete native grasses and forbs.

5. In cooperation with partners, restore and maintain habitats for threatened, endangered, or declining species including lesser prairie chicken, black-footed ferret, swift fox, black-tailed prairie dog, mountain plover, and burrowing owl.

6. Increase awareness about the ecological and economic benefits of good prairie management through expanded outreach and environmental education efforts aimed at the general public, landowners, and elected officials.

7. Develop school curriculum demonstrating native prairie functions and values and the interrelationships between people, animals and plants.

8. Develop a cost analysis between doing landscape scale work now versus waiting and doing species-by-species preservation under the Endangered Species Act.

Strategies to Accomplish Goals:

1. Survey and inventory remaining saline wetlands within focus areas.
2. Initiate and/or participate in partnerships to protect saline wetlands.
3. Restore and enhance 2.5 million acres of tallgrass prairie within the focus areas.
4. Protect and/or enhance 1500 miles of rivers.
5. Work with partners to enroll lands in CRP and other buffer initiatives along riparian areas.
6. Coordinate with Corps of Engineers to limit stream channelization.
7. Promote partnerships to work on landscape scale initiatives designed to proactively work towards preventing future listings under the ESA.
8. Promote environmental education.
9. Promote conservation easements.
10. Promote increased funding for conservation work on private lands.
11. Invasive species control.

Partners:

American Sport Fishing Association
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service
Cattlemen's Association
Conservation Districts
Corps of Engineers
Department of Defense
Department of Transportation
Ducks Unlimited
Farm Bureaus
Individual landowners
Kansas Association of Conservation and Environmental Education
Kansas Association of Teachers of Science
KS Land Trust
KS Wetland Riparian Alliance
Local and National Audubon Societies
Local non-profits conservation groups
National Fish & Wildlife Foundation
Natural Resource Conservation Service
Niobrara Council
Oil companies (Texaco, Phillips)
Partners in Flight Biological Heritage Program
Pheasants Forever
Platte River Cooperative
Platte River Whooping Crane Trust
Prairie Plains Resource Institute
Quail Unlimited
Rain Water Basin Joint Ventures

Resource and Conservation Development Councils
Sandhill Task Force
Sierra Club
State Conservation Commission
State Extensions
State land boards
State School Districts
State natural resource agencies
Tallgrass Legacy Alliance
The Nature Conservancy
Tribes
Universities
US Department of Agriculture
Utilities (Western Resources)
Water Conservancy
Wild Turkey Federation
Wildlife Management Institute

GEOGRAPHIC SUB - UNIT: MOUNTAIN

Mountain - Resource Area:

The Mountain subunit of the Platte / Kansas Rivers ecosystem includes north-central Colorado and south-central Wyoming. It encompasses the headwaters of the North and South Platte Rivers. Hydrology of these rivers has been greatly altered primarily by irrigation practices and reservoir development. North Platte Reservoirs include Pathfinder, Alcova, Seminoe, Glendo, Grey Rocks and Guernsey. Elevations range from 5000 to 13,500 feet changing from a sagebrush steppe to coniferous forest. Although the mountainous areas receive significant snowfall, generally the climate is semi-arid with average rainfall between 8 - 16 inches per year. This region includes the Laramie Plains and associated Big and Little Laramie River riparian corridors.

Mountain - Vision:

Mountain ecosystems will be characterized by: 1) healthy, unfragmented sagebrush dominated communities; 2) healthy river systems that maintain indigenous species; 3) healthy Laramie Plains rivers and lakes that support amphibians such as the Wyoming toad; 4) healthy sub-alpine communities that contain a diversity of species including boreal toads; 5) wildlife habitats that maintain ecological integrity in conjunction with economic development and urbanization.

Mountain - Threatened and Endangered Species:

Preble's meadow jumping mouse
Blowout penstemon
Bald eagle
Ute ladies tresses orchid
Black-footed ferret
North Park phacelia
Wyoming toad
Greenback cutthroat trout
Laramie false sagebrush
Canada lynx
Mexican spotted owl
Pawnee montane skipper

Mountain - Species of Conservation Concern:

Black-tailed prairie dog
Boreal toad
Sage grouse
White faced ibis
Burrowing owl
Water skipper butterfly
Rocky Mountain capshell snail
Wolverine

Mountain - Invasive Species of Concern:

Russian olive
Knapweed(s)
Yellow toadflax
Dalmatian toadflax
Leafy spurge
Purple loosestrife
Canada thistle
Musk thistle
White top
Smooth brome grass
Cheat grass
Hounds tongue

Mountain - Ecological Targets / Priorities:

Sage Communities
Platte River Systems (North and South)
Wyoming Toad/Laramie Plains Habitat
Mountain Lakes and wetland/wet meadow habitats 8,000 - 10,000 feet elevation
Front Range riparian corridor

Mountain - Goals and Objectives:

- 1A. Maintain or re-establish sage communities to provide integrity for indigenous flora and fauna (species include sage grouse, sage thrasher and Brewers sparrow).
- 1B. Support the goals and objectives outlined in sage grouse management plans for Jackson, Albany and Carbon counties.
2. Protect, enhance, restore the North Platte River above Lake McConaughy to support indigenous flora and fauna and improve stream function.
- 3A. Support goals and objectives outlined in the Wyoming Toad Recovery Plan. Support chytrid fungus research by encouraging research on Mortenson Lake NWR by 2005.
- 3B. Maintain, protect and restore the ecological integrity of the Laramie plains to support indigenous flora and fauna.
4. Prevent degradation of habitat that supports indigenous flora and fauna around mountain lakes and wet meadows between 8,000 and 10,000 feet elevation.
5. Maintain ecological integrity of Front Range communities in conjunction with economic development and urbanization.

Strategies to Accomplish Goals:

Through partnerships:

1A. Refine data on current habitat conditions and needs assessment for sage obligate species patterns.

1B. By 2005, Arapaho NWR will be a demonstration site for healthy sage community management.

2A. Establish partnerships with Platte River users to minimize threats to river corridor species

2B. Investigate water quantity and quality problems by 2004 to determine methods by which partner's may improve existing conditions.

3A. Fund a Wyoming Toad Coordinator Position as outlined in the Wyoming Toad Recovery Plan.

3B. Support chytrid fungus research by encouraging research on Mortenson Lake NWR by 2005.

3C. With partners, restore 200 acres of wetlands within the Laramie Plains by 2005

4A. Support partnerships with the U. S Forest Service and Wyoming Game and Fish Department to locate and map imperilled species habitat including boreal toads.

4B. By 2003, produce and distribute informational posters, literature and informational programs for the public that promote responsible land use.

5A. Create a Front Range Riparian Initiative that will address current threats to degraded riparian areas.

5B. By 2010, restore/protect 100 miles of riparian habitat along the Colorado Front Range

Partners:

The Nature Conservancy

Ducks Unlimited

State Natural Resource agencies

Department of Defense

Other State agencies

Natural Resource Conservation Service

US Forest Service

Soil Conservation Districts

Farm Bureau

Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service

Universities

Pheasants Forever

Cattlemen's Association
Individual landowners
Department of Transportation
Utilities
Water Conservancy
Railroad
US Department of Agriculture
State Land Boards
State and Local non-profits

GEOGRAPHIC SUB - UNIT: SHORT GRASS PRAIRIE

Shortgrass Prairie - Resource Area:

The Shortgrass prairie sub unit of the Platte / Kansas Rivers ecosystem includes eastern Colorado and southeastern Wyoming from the Front Range east into the Nebraska Panhandle, southwest Nebraska and approximately the western 1/3 of Kansas. Elevations range from 6000' in the west to 2000' in the east. Major riparian systems include the North and South Platte Rivers, and the headwaters of the Republican and Kansas rivers and their tributaries. Topography is generally flat to rolling plateau. Climate is semi-arid with average rainfall between 10-20 inches per year. Native vegetation is dominated by grasslands and mixed grass-shrub communities. Dominate species include buffalo grass and blue grama in the grasslands and sand sage shrub lands. Since European settlement, riparian corridors have become wooded habitats that provide immigration routes for eastern species.

Short Grass Prairie - Vision

The vision of the ecoteam for Shortgrass Prairie ecosystem is one in which: 1) native grasslands remain the predominate habitat type and conversion of grasslands to other uses is minimized; 2) habitat values of existing grasslands are restored; 3) threatened, endangered and endemic species are protected; 4) recreational opportunities are enjoyed in a manner compatible with resources protection; 5) economic development complement environmental protection; 6) decisions are based on the best available scientific data; 7) stakeholders are involved in a collaborative decision-making process; 8) actions are guided by adaptive, flexible management and monitoring; 9) partnerships are the norm; 10) a largely private owned landscape where family farms and ranches are economically viable and resource stewardship is tied to sustainable agriculture; 11) urban development and regional planning incorporate open space and biodiversity as an important part of urban infra-structure and quality of life.

Short Grass Prairie - Threatened and Endangered Species:

Eskimo curlew
Preble's meadow jumping mouse
Blowout penstemon
Bald eagle
Ute ladies tresses orchid
Colorado butterfly plant
Least tern
Piping plover
Wyoming toad
Whooping crane

Short Grass Prairie - Species of Conservation Concern:

Black-tailed prairie dog
Mountain plover

Swift fox
Ferruginous hawk
Long-billed curlew
Upland nesting passerine birds
Native aquatic species
Yellow mud turtle

Short Grass Prairie - Invasive Species of Concern:

Reed canary grass
Phragmites
Smooth brome
Cheat grass
Russian olive
Knapweed(s)
Dalmatian toadflax
Leafy spurge
Purple loosestrife
Canada thistle
Zebra mussel
Eurasian water milfoil

Short Grass Prairie - Ecological Targets / Priorities:

1. Black-tailed prairie dog ecosystem
2. Riparian corridors - South Platte River
3. Shortgrass prairie grasslands
4. Sand-sage Communities
5. West edge of Nebraska Sandhills

Short Grass Prairie - Goals and Objectives:

1. Protect and/or restore 100,000 acres of occupied Black-tailed prairie dog ecosystem in accordance with Multi-state and Colorado Plans within the next 5 years.
2. Protect and/or restore 20 miles of riparian corridor within the next 5 years along both large and small drainages.
3. Restore/protect/create 2500 acres of wetlands within the next five years.
4. Enhance/restore (i.e. weed control, livestock management) 20,000 acres in short grass prairie grasslands and sand-sage communities within the next 5 years.

Strategies to Accomplish Goals:

Through partnerships:

1. Refine data on current habitat conditions and land ownership patterns
2. Refine and implement grassland and wetland restoration techniques and methods
3. Work on two prairie dog MOU's (Colorado and Multi-State)
4. Promote environmental education
5. Develop and implement a vaccine and delivery system to curb sylvatic plague in prairie dogs
6. Create voluntary landowner incentive programs to control invasive species
7. Land protection (fee and easements) by FWS and our Partners

Partners:

The Nature Conservancy
Ducks Unlimited
State Natural Resource agencies
Department of Defense
regional and local land trusts
Other State agencies
NRCS
US Forest Service
Soil Conservation Districts
Farm Bureau
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service
Universities
Pheasants Forever
Cattlemen's Association
Individual landowners
Department of Transportation
Utilities
Water Conservancy
railroad
US Department of Agriculture
State Land Boards
State and Local non-profits

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Samson, F.B. and F. Knopf. 1994. Prairie Conservation in North America, Bioscience, Vol 44, No. 6 (418 - 421).

Fulfilling the Promise. 1999. US Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior publication. 92 pp.

APPENDIX 1

Ecosystem Decision Matrix

Criteria

1) Threatened and endangered species. 15 Points Maximum

The intent of this criteria is to give more weight to proposals demonstrating a direct benefit to the greatest number of imperiled species, those species that are in greatest need of assistance, and proposals that move the species towards recovery.

Species Status

Endangered:	5 points	*	# of endangered species =
Threatened:	3 points	*	# of threatened species =
Proposed:	2 points	*	# of proposed species =
Candidate:	1 point	*	# of candidate species =

2) Migratory Birds. 15 Points Maximum

Provides habitat for raptors:	3 points
Provides habitat for passerines:	3 points
Provides habitat for ducks, geese, and swans:	3 points
Provides habitat for shorebirds and other wetland obligate species:	3 points
Provides habitat for 3 or more of the migratory bird groups above:	3 points

3) Large, Intact Landscapes. 15 Points Maximum

Large tract of land or potential acres impacted:

> 5000 acres:	5 points
1000 - 5000 acres:	3 points
<1000 acres:	1 point

Land adjoining or expanding upon areas already protection
(i.e. subject to state and/or federal resource protection laws): 3 points

Disturbance/Restoration Potential:

Little to no disturbance (pristine):	4 points
Slight disturbance (easily restored):	3 points
Moderate disturbance (moderate restoration required):	2 points
Significant restoration required:	1 point
Heavily disturbed (cannot be restored):	0 points

Lands that create corridors linking priority habitats:	3 points
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4) Fisheries. 15 Points Maximum

High quality habitat present:	5 points
Habitat capable of being restored:	4 points
Presence of indigenous species:	3 points
Absence of non-native or invasive species:	3 points

5) Degree and Immediacy of Threats. 15 Points Maximum

This criteria measures the immediacy as well as the potential degree and extent of threats facing a particular resource.

Degree of Threat:

High degree of threat:	8 points
Medium degree of threat:	5 points
Low degree of threat:	2 points

Immediacy of Threat:

Immediate and imminent action pending:	7 points
Moderate chance of impending action:	4 points
Slight chance of impending action:	1 point

6) Good Opportunities. 10 Points Maximum

Ten or more partners:	Yes / No
Identified as a “Focus Area” by NGO or other agency	Yes / No
At least a 3:1 non-FWS match available	Yes / No
Watershed group in place:	Yes / No
Defined and measurable objectives:	Yes / No
Multiple native species benefits:	Yes / No

Excellent (6 of 6 criteria met):	10 points
Very Good (5 of 6):	7 points
Good (4 of 6):	5 points
Fair (3 of 6):	3 points
Poor (2 or less):	1 point

7) Likelihood of Achieving Objective(s) as Defined: 10 Points Maximum

Will meet or exceed objective(s):	10 points
Will meet most objective(s):	7 points
Will meet some objective(s):	4 points
Does not meet objective(s):	0 points

8) Cost/Benefits: 5 Points Maximum

This criteria may not apply to all opportunities (units other than area may require different multipliers).

Less than \$300 per acre:	5 points
\$300 - \$700 per acre:	3 points
Greater than \$700 per acre:	1 point

GRAND TOTAL: 100 Points Maximum =
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APPENDIX 2

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APPENDIX 3

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